



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

AESCHYLUS, POET AND MORALIST

By THOMAS A. BECKER, S.J.
Boston College

In dramatic as in epic and lyric poetry the Greeks were not merely the pioneers who paved the way for later literature, but they achieved unsurpassed mastery in the art they created. And leaving out of our present discussion the question of drama's crude beginnings, we may say that the father of Greek tragedy was the soldier poet of Marathon. This distinction seems to belong to Aeschylus, whatever concessions we make to his supposed predecessor. Even though Thespis invented tragic drama ten or more years before the birth of Aeschylus, it was the subject of our sketch who fashioned it into a distinctive form of literary art and carried it to a perfection that his younger rivals did not essentially modify. The drama existed in embryonic form when Ionian epos and Dorian lay had been loosely joined together, but it was the poet of the *Agamemnon* who really gave birth to tragedy.

Aeschylus possessed in a supreme degree creative power, the lofty gift of poetic inspiration. His might and majesty, alike in thought and expression, warrant for him the name of genius. Symonds plausibly suggests that Aeschylus illustrates "the artistic psychology of Plato." With that philosopher the poet's power is a fine frenzy, a divine *μανία*. To say that poetry is *θεῖον καὶ μὴ τεχνικόν* is the exaggeration of a writer himself a poet, but an exaggeration that is in some sense justified. To fix the bounds and describe the functions of genius and art in poetry would lead us too far afield. But it may be said in passing that great poets are invariably artists, though the art be not always obtrusive, and while not necessarily self-conscious they are not therefore unconscious artists. The untamed energy of creative genius, the conceptions that exhaust the resources of language, are consistent with classic self-restraint. Sophocles and Tennyson suggest above all the conscientious craftsman. Aeschylus and Shakespeare rise

before us as men of massive mold who are rather impatient than ignorant of the laws of art, but who command at will a noble symmetry and a keen sense of artistic unity.

The genius of Aeschylus, as has been pointed out repeatedly, is most conspicuously shown in the vastness and grandeur of his creations. In the phrase of a noted critic, "he was the demiurge of ancient art." Abstractions, vague portraits of the Greek conscience, elemental beings, outlines faintly limned by the popular imagination are dowered by this Prometheus with definite form and substance. Justice and sin and ancestral curse loom gigantically before us as persons of his drama. Sun and earth and sky thrill with life. The brazen-footed Furies, with snaky locks and fiery breath, hunt their quarry on his stage. Ætna trembles responsive to the throes of Enceladus. Ghosts and denizens of an unseen world, all the unsubstantial pageantry of dreams fix the gaze and arrest the ear.

In the realm of human nature too his portrayal is titanic. The heroes that thunder at the seven gates of Thebes, the unrivaled figure of Clytemnestra, Persia and Hellas locked in the grim embrace of war's death-grapple, are colossal in the grandeur of their conception while they lose nothing of majesty or dignity in delineation. If we would find a kindred spirit to that of the Athenian mystic, we must go to the genius that gave us Coriolanus, Macbeth, and Lear.

Aeschylus is generally represented by critics as an hierophant, as the theologian of Greek tragedy. He is styled "a mythopoeist," or "pre-eminently a religious poet." This does not mean that he chose his subjects from religious myths to the exclusion of national legend. True, in the *Prometheus* the only human personage is Io, and in the *Choephoroe* and the *Eumenides* divine powers take an important part in the action. Besides there breathes in all the tragedies a spirit of divine intervention and over all there broods a suggestion of mysticism. But the poet like his compeers drew his material from the familiar legendary lore of Greece, the stories of Thebes, Argos, and Mycenae. One daring innovation, of which Phrynichus furnished a parallel, was the dramatization of contemporary history in the *Persae*. If Athenaeus is to be trusted,

the poet himself said that his plays were fragments from the banquet of Homer, that is, from the legends of the epic cycle. (Athen. viii. 347 E.)

Despite the narrow limits of a subject-matter prescribed by tradition, the Greek playwrights allowed themselves a fair amount of freedom in adapting legend to the purposes of dramatic art. We should probably find that Aeschylus did not feel himself constrained to follow the Hesiodic form of the Promethean myth, if the trilogy had survived to make a comparison possible. Again, the poet's political bias is displayed in the *Supplikes* and the *Oresteia*. The Pelasgic king of Argos shows a marked deference to popular opinion. So Athenian sentiment or tradition attributed a democratic tendency to the pre-historic monarchy as we may infer from Aristotle's reference to what he styles the "constitution of Theseus." (*Const. Ath.* 41. 2.) However, in the *Eumenides* the aristocratic leanings of the dramatist reveal themselves when he assigns a divine origin to the court of the Areopagus.

From the material we naturally pass to a consideration of the construction. At the outset we must remember the preference of Aeschylus for the trilogy. Readers of romantic drama are likely to be more in sympathy with the method of Sophocles and Euripides who complete a tragic action in a single play. But Aeschylus, whose creative faculty was massive in conception, chose rather a broad canvas; or, to illustrate from another art, his power is seen not in the deft and subtle artistry of delicate detail, but in shaping with his Titan's chisel huge mountain crags into forms of super-human grandeur. His architecture is cyclopean. His music is the simple, crashing symphonies of waking worlds, the diapason of heaven and earth. And yet the entire length of the Oresteian trilogy is less than that of *Hamlet*, as Morshead has observed.

It should be noted further that the poet's preference for the trilogy means no abatement of his skill in the construction of single plays. In them we can discern an exposition or preparation for the tragic conflict, a growth of the action to a crisis, a descending movement to a catastrophe. Still it is only in the *Eumenides* that the action is fully closed, and it is noteworthy that in this play all is laid in peace and reconciliation as in the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles

and in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. The poet's aim should ever be borne in mind when studying the plan of construction of an Aeschylean tragedy. That the drama of Sophocles and Euripides is characterized by a more closely knit unity, by greater delicacy, and by a more finished elaboration of detail, proves not that Aeschylus was less skilled as an artist but that he followed a different method. And there are doubtless many readers to whom simplicity makes a stronger appeal than complexity, who derive a keener aesthetic pleasure from the bare, almost bald, outline of Aeschylean tragedy than from the drama of deftly woven intrigue.

The prologue, so common in Euripides, has more than once been stigmatized as a sorry makeshift. Aeschylus plunges at once into the action. Bradley has pointed out Shakespeare's method of beginning with a short scene full of life to engage the spectator's attention. Aeschylus adopts a style that is analogous if not strictly parallel. With the watchman in the *Agamemnon* we see the leaping beacon fires that herald the king's return. The Furies toss in restless sleep about their victim in the *Eumenides*. Hephaestus and his jailers rivet the Titan to his lonely crag in the *Prometheus*.

Before dismissing the subject of construction a word about the choral element may not be amiss. The *Suppliants* is of particular interest to the student of the development of Greek tragedy, for more than half the play is composed of lyric strains. Indeed we have here rather a cantata than a drama, and the dithyramb of Dionysus, which was the fore-runner of "lyrical tragedy" and of tragedy proper, retains an importance that disappears even in the plays of Aeschylus. But in his tragedy the chorus never is reduced to a mere musical interlude, it remains always an integral, if not an essential, part of the play and at times enters conspicuously into the action.

Aeschylus is a master not only of invention and construction, but of characterization as well. The impression may exist in some minds that the poet was incapable of painting human nature. Perhaps the reason is that critics have dwelt with undue insistence on his preference for gods and demigods, or for human heroes of colossal bulk whose lineaments are but dimly seen and whose

motives can be but vaguely scanned in the fitful glare of an inspiration that is rather lurid than illuminating. We may concede that Sophocles humanized myth and legend, nay, even the working of Nemesis, and that Euripides brought into Greek tragedy a reality of portraiture that has earned for him the distinction of being the prophet of romanticism. But Aeschylus, for all his grand manner, was a consummate artist in drawing character. The epic fulness of the action may withdraw our attention from the skill of his portraiture. His scheme of construction and surcharged religious thought led him, in the creation of character, to depict types rather than individuals. But Prometheus and Clytemnestra alone place Aeschylus by the side of the supreme master of characterization, Shakespeare.

If any complain that Agamemnon's murderess is rather a Fury than a woman, they only agree with Clytemnestra's own opinion of herself. She recalls Goneril and Regan and Lady Macbeth, though different from them all as they differ from one another. She has all the concentrated hate of Lear's heartless daughters, and her strength, unlike Lady Macbeth's, never snaps under the strain. In the *Choephores* as in the *Agamemnon* her mind is keen and crafty, her will is strong to inflexibility. Yet her character is marked by a certain dignity. After wreaking vengeance on the slayer of her child with the fury of an enraged lioness, she does not stoop with Aegisthus to insult the fallen king nor does she bandy taunt and bluster with the Argive elders. She is haughty and terrible in her triumph, undaunted when the sword of Orestes is at the breast to which, as she reminds him, he once clung a suckling babe. Relentlessly vindictive she returns from the spirit world to goad the Furies who are her avengers.

Our poet's creative power in plot and construction displays the range and vigor of his imagination. Vividness of imagination naturally reveals itself in language. The complaint is often made that the grandeur of Aeschylus frequently degenerates into bombast. Even his apologist, Aristophanes, cannot refrain from parodying his ponderous epithets that too often are marshaled in a serried phalanx. Shakespeare too, we are told, is unduly fond of making language do more than can be asked of it. Marlowe's

"mighty line" not infrequently has more of sound than sense. But, as with these poets, so with Aeschylus, faults of diction are the exaggeration of virtues. His incoherence is due to the sublimity of the thought with which his language, as yet an imperfect instrument, ineffectually struggles. Far different is the inarticulate utterance, the clumsy affectation of a solemn or rugged manner that masks a shallow or feeble mind.

To convince ourselves of this we have but to recall the descriptions of grand and savage scenery in the *Prometheus*, where nature mirrors the superhuman wills that meet in conflict. All the grimness, fury, and havoc of war are painted for us in the choruses of the *Agamemnon* and in the *Persae* with a vividness possible only to a warrior-poet. Strong, if quaint, is the imagination that gives us pictures such as "the beard of fire," that conceives a hurricane as "an evil shepherd," or a lion as "the Priest of Ruin," or with gruesome realism describes wave-tossed corpses gnawed by fishes as "torn by the mute children of the undefiled," or makes Clytemnestra say "'tis not for me to tread the hall of Fear."

Symonds says that Aeschylus "surpassed all the poets of his nation in a certain Shakespearean concentration of phrase," and the same critic finds a Shakespearean quality in the graphic power of his language and imagery. It is this perhaps that some term oriental. Energy, rapidity, intensity, splendor, sweep us breathless on till we forget the polished art of Sophocles or the easy grace of Euripides. And the pathos of his description of Iphigenia, the highly dramatic portrayal of Cassandra show a genius for expression closely akin to that of the creator of Desdemona and Ophelia.

In the brief space at our disposal we can say very little about Aeschylus as a moralist. At the outset it must be remembered that a dramatist is not to be held responsible for all the utterances of his *dramatis personae*. And so critics remind us of the impersonality and impartiality of Shakespeare. But even he is a moral, if not a moralizing, poet. He is not a pessimist, he has no room for the morbid and decadent. The tragic fact is portrayed relentlessly, but we are not left despairing of man's lot or of his nature. Aeschylus, however, seems to utter a religious and a moral message, and the chorus afforded him a vehicle for its expression. His aim, like

Milton's was to justify the ways of God to man. The burden of his teaching, as with great tragic poets generally, is that the doer must suffer *δράσαντι παθεῖν*. For a tragic catastrophe is a result of deeds that have their main and sufficient cause in human character. From this men may learn wisdom.

'Tis Zeus alone who shows the perfect way
Of knowledge; He hath ruled,
Men shall learn wisdom, by affliction schooled.

—Morshead

However much Aeschylus dwells on the resistless power of destiny, of decrees to which even Zeus is amenable, he is equally insistent on man's responsibility for his fate. There is no doom except for sin, a *ἁμαρτία* apparently to be understood in a strictly moral sense. The *ἄτη* or infatuation which leads man to sin is rather the occasion than the cause of his fall. The will is not constrained to do evil, but once the deed is done, then the doom descends and inexorable fate pursues the evildoer. Though Prometheus was man's benefactor, he transgressed divine ordinances. Xerxes impiously sought to fetter the hallowed wave of Bosphorus. Eteocles is not the blameless victim of an ancestral curse, but by pride and selfishness fans anew the flame of the ancient Até of his house. Thus we find that it is a form of retribution that invariably follows the path of those who "kick against the pricks."

The dramatist distinctly disavows the popular doctrine that the divine *φθόρος* is a punishment of wealth or power, an idea that appears so frequently in the narrative of Herodotus. Despite the immemorial saying, the poet holds that it is *ὑβρις* not *ἔλβος* that brings down the wrath of heaven, though prosperity is perilous because it engenders pride. "It is an ancient saying," declares Aeschylus, "that bliss waxing great dies not without issue, and from prosperity springs a bane insatiable. But I am of another mind. It is impiety that begets these numerous children stamped with the mark of their parentage" (*Agam.* 750 ff.).

It was Heraclitus, older than Aeschylus, who said that "character is destiny." Prosperity precedes but does not therefore cause a downfall, it is a necessary condition merely. The successive

generations that suffer the doom of their house are not themselves wholly innocent. The idea of retribution is not excluded, and guilt is personal nor is its punishment wholly vicarious. In the moral world human minds and wills sin against the moral order and must atone. So in the tragic world a causal sequence leads from character through deed to doom. As Morshead has suggested there is a close parallel between the teaching of Aeschylus and that of Ezechiel (chapter 18, especially vss. 3 and 20). "What is the meaning that you use among you this parable as a proverb in the land of Israel, saying: The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and teeth of the children are set on edge. As I live, saith the Lord God, this parable shall be no more to you a proverb in Israel. . . . The soul that sinneth the same shall die." In comparison we may quote from Morshead's translation of the *Choephoroe* (630 ff.):

And the deed unlawfully done is not trodden down nor forgot,
When the sinner outsteppeth the law and heedeth the high God not.
And darkly devising, the Fiend of the house, world-cursed, will repay
The price of the blood of the slain that was shed in the bygone day.

And from the *Agamemnon* (1562 ff.):

While Time shall be, while Zeus in heaven is lord,
His law is fixed and stern;
On him that wrought shall vengeance be outpoured—
The tides of doom return.

παθεῖν τὸν ἔργαντα implies not a blind Nemesis but the operation of Justice, and none but the sinner is made to suffer. As Bradley says, in speaking of Shakespearean tragedy, a man like Job is not a tragic figure. To borrow Aristotle's term, he is *ἀνάξιος*.

Aeschylus of course, like Shakespeare, feels profoundly the mysteriousness of a power that is at once Fate and Justice, a power against which man is helpless. Ruin closes in on wealth and sway and splendid gifts. The mournful fact of waste and destruction that we know in the real world is portrayed by the tragic poet, though his vision cannot pierce the veil, *δύσμαχά ἐστι κρῖναι* (*Agam.* 1561). "Woe, woe is me, yet may the issue be fair" (*Agam.* 121) is not merely the poignant refrain of the Greek poet, it is the sad strain of humanity, a dirge that the hearts of men will echo throughout their years of exile and of pain.